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F. M. Mills Writes of Kasson

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F. M. MILLS WRITES OF KASSON

The editor of the ANNALS recently received the following very interesting communication from F. M. Mills, who acted so important a part in Des Moines and Iowa affairs half a century ago. Mr. Mills has been for several years and is now president and general manager of the Sioux Falls Traction System, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He writes that he is in good health and is on his job every day, though he will be ninety years old April 4, 1921.

Sioux Falls, S. D., October 20, 1920.

Hon. Edgar R. Harlan,
Des Moines, Iowa.

DEAR SIR:—

I have just received the July number of the ANNALS OF IOWA and am very much interested in the contents, so much so that I have read it from cover to cover.

The picture of Governor Grimes reminds me of my first meeting him. I was nominated state binder at the same Republican legislative caucus which nominated him for United States senator. This was at the first session of the legislature held at Des Moines. There was a story current at the Des Moines House where he stopped that a passenger, alighting at the hotel from a stage coach, mistook the governor for the porter and gave him his grip to carry in and handed him a quarter for a tip, which the governor courteously accepted.

The account of the Sac and Fox Indian councils of 1841 and 1842 are most interesting and well worthy being printed in the ANNALS.

I was greatly pleased to find in this issue the "Autobiography of Hon. John A. Kasson." It is a pity that he did not add to it an account of the last fifteen years of his life in which some of his most important official services to the country occurred, as you have named them in your editorial note attached to his autobiography.

Mr. Kasson came to Des Moines in 1857, just one year after I did, and I became acquainted with him soon after his arrival and was closely associated with him for most of the time he lived in Des Moines, and afterward had considerable correspondence with him. He was the attorney of our company. He loaned me the money to build our publishing house on Court Avenue. He prepared many of the blanks which we published in our list of 1,000 for county and court use. He compiled and edited the first law book we published, "The Civil Code of Iowa." I believe this was the only book he ever was the author of.

I was in the Wigwam when Lincoln was nominated and heard the

platform read which was adopted and which was mostly prepared by Mr. Kasson and credited to him by Horace Greeley in *The Tribune*.

Mentioning Horace Greeley reminds me of a controversy I overheard between him and Thurlow Weed the night before Lincoln was nominated, of which I was the only witness. I was seated in the big parlor or corridor on the story above the office of the Tremont Hotel when they made their appearance. Weed, the manager of Seward's campaign, editor of *The Albany Journal*, had managed to keep Greeley off the New York delegation because he was opposed to Seward, but Greeley had secured a proxy and represented the state of Oregon in the convention. The two men strode up and down the length of the room in hot controversy. Greeley was as urgent for Lincoln as Weed was for Seward. This lasted for over half an hour when they separated in an angry mood. I was the only person present during the whole quarrel and I have often wished I could have had a stenographic report of it.

To revert to Mr. Kasson—his efficient services as chairman of the Iowa State Republican Committee and during the campaign, made him the most prominent Iowa Republican. His speeches were models of political oratory. He had the finest choice of words of any speaker I ever listened to. His language, both written or spoken, was perfect. His diction was elegant, yet plain and concise, and there was never any doubt as to what he meant. Every hearer could readily understand him.

After his services as first assistant postmaster general he became a candidate for congress in a hotly contested campaign. In this first campaign he personally gave me the credit for his nomination, as he did several years later for his nomination in his last campaign.

In his first candidacy there were three candidates, Mr. Kasson from Polk County, Hon. Thos. H. Benton of Council Bluffs, state superintendent of public instruction, and a third whose name I do not now recall. At the county convention to select delegates to the district convention at Winterset I was not present but was put on as one of the delegates, supposing that as I was publishing the *Iowa School Journal* which Mr. Benton edited, that of course I would be for him for congress. Mr. Benton was a prominent Mason and had many friends in Des Moines and the convention had been worked for him. When I learned I had been put on the delegation I promptly announced that I was for Mr. Kasson and insisted that I be left off. However, as all the rest of the delegation were for Benton they refused to let me off and insisted I should go to the convention. I warned them that if I did go I would do my best to nominate Mr. Kasson, and as from my business I had many friends in every county in the district, I thought I could do something for my candidate. The delegation simply laughed at me and said I must go with them.

Arriving at Winterset and in going to the Methodist Church where the convention was held I fell in with Mr. James Jordan and we walked up together. I told him that as Mr. Kasson was a Des Moines man and

Mr. Benton was from Council Bluffs that it wouldn't seem right if we would not at least give him a complimentary vote. He said he was elected as a Benton man and would have to vote for him. In going to our places Mr. Jordan and I occupied seats just behind the rest of the delegation. As soon as the organization of the convention was made, I moved we proceed to an informal ballot, which carried. I then insisted on Mr. Jordan joining me in a complimentary vote, which he did, as there could be no nomination on the informal ballot. When it was announced the other members turned on Mr. Jordan and scolded him, which roiled him a little. On the first formal ballot I said to Mr. Jordan, "there being three candidates there can be no nomination on this, now give the boys a scare and vote this time for Kasson and I won't ask you again." He voted with me and then the other boys, some of them, cursed him and it made him mad and he stuck with me thereafter, and we managed to get the delegates of the third candidate, and so secured the nomination of Mr. Kasson. This pleased Polk County as the people generally were for him. Mr. Jordan became one of Mr. Kasson's strongest friends, an intimacy being formed which lasted all their lives.

Two years later Mr. Kasson succeeded himself and at the close of the term he was again a candidate but was defeated by General Dodge after seventy-four ballots. In the meantime there was a great change in his following. Those who fought his first nomination had become his very warm friends, while Mr. Palmer of the *Register* and Mr. Thos. Withrow and Hub Hoxie, who had been his principal backers, turned against him on account of the divorce suit of Mrs. Kasson, in which Mr. Withrow was her attorney, and supported General Dodge. In 1866 my firm, Mills & Co., bought the *State Register* from Mr. Palmer, who made it a condition that he should retain the editorship of the paper for a year. Then the warm Kasson men, who had been his enemies in the first place, because we didn't displace Palmer at once, became enemies of the *Register*, and at my second candidacy for state printer turned against me and fought me, and in connection with Judge Wright's candidacy for the U. S. Senate, and the appropriation campaign for the new Capitol, helped defeat me. Mr. Kasson came home to serve in the legislature to help secure the Capitol appropriation in which he succeeded, but he was influenced to vote against me. Mr. Palmer became a candidate for congress against Mr. Kasson and of course I was for Palmer since Mr. Kasson had been induced to break with me. In that campaign Mr. Palmer was elected. After that for a while Mr. Kasson and I did not speak as we passed by.

In the meantime we had sold the *Register* to the Clarkson company and in 1874 when Mr. Kasson was announced as a candidate for congress the *Register* had brought out General Williamson. For sufficient reasons, the smallest of which was that General Williamson had helped defeat me, I did my best to nominate Mr. Kasson, although we had been

"fernenst" each other for a few years. I had never undertaken to influence the men in my employ to vote my way, but in this case I told the boys the situation and they voted for Kasson. They gave him the twenty-two necessary votes which gave him the township, which gave him the county and secured the district for him. Mr. Kasson was abroad during this campaign. When he returned home he came to see me and said that he understood his indebtedness to me and thanked me, and intimated he would like to renew our friendship which had been interrupted by misunderstanding. I told him plainly that I worked for him because I had a settlement to make with General Williamson, that in our previous jolt I had gotten even with him and that had squared us, and so there was nothing in the way. From thence on he and I were the best of friends. I met him in Vienna where he was very nice to me and also in Washington.

Many thought Mr. Kasson was of a cold nature. This was a mistake. He was nice and rather precise, but warm hearted and of lovely manners, always the perfect gentleman, a diplomat in private life as he was in public life. Take him all in all Iowa has never produced his superior.

He referred in his autobiography to having been a Free Mason. When the Free Masons at Des Moines decided to build their temple, there were two locations named, on which the membership were about equally divided. I was strongly in favor of the location at the corner of Seventh and Walnut and the other location was on Locust Street. I wrote to Mr. Kasson who was a stockholder, asking him to vote for the Walnut Street lots, which he did, and his vote decided the location. He was much interested in Des Moines and in Iowa to the last.

The ANNALS OF IOWA deserves great credit for publishing this record of the life and valuable services of Iowa's greatest and most accomplished statesman and publicist.

Sincerely yours,

F. M. MILLS.

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